

# **NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES**

SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE



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Enduring Questions  
Institution: Sweet Briar College



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE  
HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF EDUCATION  
PROGRAMS

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## **National Endowment for the Humanities Division of Education Programs**

### **Excerpt from a Successful Application**

This excerpt from a grant application is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with staff members in the NEH Division of Education Programs well before a grant deadline. The excerpt does not include a budget or résumé.

**Project Title:** Should Art Be Moral? The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry

**Institution:** Sweet Briar College

**Project Director:** Mark Alznauer

**Grant Program:** Enduring Questions Course Grants

## 1. Narrative

### Should Art Be Moral? The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry

#### A. Intellectual Rationale

In the final book of Plato's *Republic*, after vigorously arguing against the literature and drama of his day, Socrates offers a brief apology for his apparent philistinism. His denunciation of the arts, he says, reflected no unlearned prejudice – he knows the charms of poetry as much as any Greek – rather it was demanded of him by reason itself. At any rate, his worries are nothing new; they are just a continuation of what he calls “the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.”

This course will borrow its name from this passage of the *Republic*, for despite the two and a half millennia that have passed since Plato wrote, the quarrel Socrates speaks of has shown no signs of being resolved. Poets still write out of inspiration, providing imitations of human actions, beautiful and ugly, without drawing any final conclusion as to their ultimate worth. And there still exist philosophers and theologians whose love of poetry is tempered by worries about the moral defectiveness of even the finest of these depictions.

At the heart of the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy is a concern about the moral value of art. The question that is continually debated is: should art be moral? The three basic answers that have been given to this question are easy to survey, though they admit of infinite variations and compromises. The first, the Socratic position, is that art must be subservient to morality, even if that means sacrificing its beauty or effectiveness. The second position is that great art merely by being great art is necessarily morally edifying – one never needs to choose between following the demands

of art and the demands of morality. The third possibility is that art is of higher value than morality either because it helps break the ground in for the growth of a new morality or because it frees us from the artificial constraints of rational or moral thought.

Though the issues are clear, the battle lines between philosophy and poetry have often been crossed. In the late nineteenth century, the philosopher Nietzsche was celebrating the Dionysian excesses of early Greek tragedy against the stultifying moralism of Socratic philosophy at the same time that Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist, was thundering against the moral vacuity of modern arts and demanding that any art worthy of the name promote the brotherhood of man. As any survey of the history of this debate would quickly make evident, some of the greatest defenders of poetry have been philosophers and some of its severest critics, poets.

“The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry” will attempt to do justice to this theme by looking at the issue of the moral value of art from both sides. On the artistic side, we will be studying some of the greatest artistic achievements of the Western tradition – including works of poetry, drama, fiction and opera – and making one visit to see one of these dramas performed. Alongside these forays into the arts, we will be reading evaluations of the moral function of these works written by philosophers, literary critics, and artists themselves. Since this is a rich topic with a long and illustrious history, we will be able to concentrate on a number of artists and writers of the first rank.

## **B. Course Design**

The class will be divided into three units. The first unit will deal with ancient and medieval works. Foremost of these is, of course, the last book of Plato’s *Republic*, which has served as a touchstone in this debate ever since it was written. Socrates’ notorious

critique of poetry will be read alongside two canonical works of Greek drama that explicitly or implicitly challenge the Socratic position: Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a direct attack on philosophy, and Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, with its non-Socratic emphasis on piety and the dangers of self-knowledge. This Greek controversy will be contrasted with a strikingly similar controversy that occurred during the classical period of Chinese philosophy between Mo Tzu and Hsun Tzu who debated whether cultivating a taste for music was compatible with the duties of citizenship. Finally, to illustrate the development the quarrel underwent in the Middle Ages, we will look at Tertullian's *De Spectaculis*, which subsumes a critique of the theatre within a general polemic against the spectacles of Rome, and Dante's implicit defense of the spiritual uses of poetry, *La vita nuova*, which intersperses his poems with prose to help explain their moral and religious purpose and interpretation.

The second unit will deal with the flowering of this debate in the modern era. We will begin with Molière's *Misanthrope*, a comedy that ridicules its most morally earnest character, Alceste. This will be followed by Rousseau's impassioned condemnation of the immorality of Molière in his *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre*, a work which carefully draws on themes from Book X of the *Republic* in order to articulate a modern version of the Platonic critique. We will then turn to another conscious reworking of the *Republic*, Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, which provides an alternative and more harmonious picture of possible relations between art and morality. This will be read in conjunction with one of Schiller's plays, *The Robbers*, to see how his conception of the moral function of art informs his drama. (If time allows, we might also include Matthew Arnold's similar defense of art: *Culture and Anarchy*.) Finally, we will

turn to Nietzsche's full frontal assault on Socratic moralism in the name of art, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. *The Birth of Tragedy* will be studied in conjunction with the opera *Tristan and Isolde* by Richard Wagner, the composer to whom Nietzsche dedicated his book and who he declared represented a modern rebirth of the tragic spirit.

The third and final unit will study several nineteenth and twentieth century artists who have given explicit treatment of the manner in which moral concerns inform their writing: Leo Tolstoy, Bertold Brecht, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Flannery O'Connor. In each case we will read one of the author's works (e.g., Tolstoy's controversial novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* or O'Connor's graphic "A Good Man is Hard to Find") alongside his or her statement on the proper moral constraints on artistic production (e.g., Tolstoy's *What is Art?* or the essays in O'Connor's *Mystery and Manners*).

With the exception of the reading from the *Republic* and the readings in Chinese philosophy, every book, play, or essay used in our class will be read in its entirety. Because of the brevity of most of these works—the longest is not much more than 100 pages—this will be possible without ever assigning more than 50 pages of reading for any given class meeting. The class will be run as a bi-weekly seminar, limited to an enrollment of twenty, with students expected to participate fully in every class discussion. Students will also be expected to write three papers of increasing length, one for each unit of the course. Paper topics will be carefully designed to give students further opportunity to bring these thinkers and artists in dialogue with each other. The course will be offered either in Sweet Briar College's Honors Program, which sponsors courses that encourage critical thinking across the disciplines, or as an Interdisciplinary Studies course; in either case it will be open to all students and will have no prerequisites. The class will also

include a trip to Washington D.C. to see one of the assigned plays performed on the stage (which play will depend on what is offered at the time).

The course will be offered at least twice at Sweet Briar: once in the Fall of 2009 and once in the Fall of 2010. The effectiveness of the course will be determined by student evaluations. These evaluations will consist of open-ended questions intended to solicit opinions about the course's success in addressing its guiding question—should art be moral?—both fairly and comprehensively. Evaluations from the first offering of the course will be used to refine the syllabus and requirements of the course in its second offering. If the course is deemed successful, there are no obstacles to permanently adding it to the regular offerings in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, in which case it would be taught every other year.

### **C. Project Direction**

The project will be directed by Mark Alznauer, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Sweet Briar College. Professor Alznauer recently completed a dissertation on Hegel's moral philosophy at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought. He has had extensive experience studying and teaching the classics of the Western tradition, both as a student at St. John's College in Annapolis and then as a professor at Roosevelt University, the University of Chicago, and now Sweet Briar College. While at Chicago, he served as a Research Assistant for an exhibit at the University of Chicago Library on the history of the Great Books movement in America and was the recipient of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute's Western Civilization Fellowship. He is currently working on a book-length manuscript on Hegel's theory of action and its later transformation in the writings of Marx and Kierkegaard.

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